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Seeking Success: Where and How to Look for Success Factors in USAID/NGO Natural Resource Management Projects in Africa

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Context

As USAID and its development partners in Private Voluntary Organizations (PVOs)/ Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) look for ways to enhance natural resource management (NRM), one of the focal points must be factors that enable or constrain success in NRM activities. One way to do this is by developing a grid or check list of factors, done in collaboration with a number of partners. On-going projects would be used to test the list, and refinements made in the process.

These factors potentially have broader applicability. In the near future USAID and collaborating partners will work towards forging meaningful connections between democracy in national governance, and democracy as local empowerment and citizen responsibility. At the same time, most of those whose professional attention has focused on renewable resource issues agree that actual resource users must regain a major role in the governance of land, water, forests and other resources in their localities. For both USAID and PVOs/NGOs to perceive and integrate the profound connections between democracy writ large and small, there needs to be a fuller



understanding of the current state of resource management efforts undertaken by these agencies.

Background

This paper comes near the end of a year-long appraisal of USAID's effectiveness in working with NGOs in natural resource management (NRM) in Africa. It was done for the Africa Bureau and was managed by the US Forest Service/International Forestry.

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One might situate this extended analytical exercise in NRM effectiveness within the framework of USAID's overall efforts to improve its performance and collaboration with non-governmental agencies. This larger effort includes, for example, both long term projects like USAID Africa Bureau's PVO Initiatives Project that ended last year, and punctual tasks, such as the current multi-task force examination of the USAID-PVO/NGO relationship that USAID's Policy Directorate and the NGO umbrella InterAction are undertaking. Particularly in this present moment of USAID institutional restructuring and review of operations, NGOs and USAID share a strong mutual interest in working together as efficaciously as possible.

One of the major events of the year-long NRM appraisal was an international workshop in November 1992 entitled *USAID-NGO Effectiveness in Implementing Natural Resource Management in Africa* which include representatives from various USAID offices, US PVOs and African NGOs, as well as UN agencies, World Bank and other donors, Peace Corps, USDA/Forest Service and several contracting firms (Mullen and Helin, 1992). This conference, it should be noted, was based on two preparatory studies. The first is *Non-Governmental Organizations and Natural Resources Management in Africa: A Literature Review* (Ramanathan, 1992). The second, *Non-Governmental Organizations and Natural Resources Management in Africa: A Discussion of Issues and Priorities*, consists of three separate papers examining the topic from perspectives of African NGOs, US NGOs (PVOs) and multilateral agencies (Booth, Njuki and Otto, 1992).

From the proceedings of this conference emerge a series of closely related concerns centered around assessing progress in NRM:

- Measuring and monitoring project impacts;
- Gathering lessons learned from our experiences;
- Pulling together knowledge on the technical aspects of sustainability; and
- Developing the channels to share findings across geographical and institutional boundaries.

The conferees expressed a common concern that the development community does not know enough about what is working, what is not working, and the factors that enable or constrain success in NRM activities.

The conferees expressed a common concern that the development community does not know enough about what is working, what is not working, and the factors that enable or constrain success in NRM activities. Given this spotlight on learning, it was logical that a follow up workshop nine months after the November conference focused on the identification of success factors in NRM interventions.

In mid-August 1993 about twenty USAID and NGO leaders met to discuss various aspects of success in NRM interventions. In addition to the foundation of the November conference, this workshop built on two briefing papers. One of these distilled conclusions from the conference

into specific recommendations for action on improving performance in NRM interventions. The second one carried the conceptual search for success factors into practical suggestions for beginning the investigation (Otto, 1993).

Possible Success Factors

The August workshop deliberations fleshed out a range of project-specific structures and approaches which might prove to be causally correlated with success in reaching NRM goals. In doing this, workshop task groups looked at three broad areas of project structures and activities to identify possible determinants of success. They postulated attributes for each that contribute to (or detract from) attainment of objectives. Major points included:

- **design and planning:** consensus on actions by all major stakeholders, value put on ownership of plans by resource users, flexibility to timeframes and funding mechanisms to accommodate multi-layered collaboration;

- **technical and institutional matters and training:** the project as a space for establishing shared agreements and shared vision, the commitment to conflict resolution and open dialogue, the vital role of true communication;

- **monitoring and evaluation, financial and administration:** using these basic management functions in a learning/teaching process, diminish disparities of knowledge and control among participating parties (donors, NGOs as service providers, and resource user groups), simplify systems and make them accessible.

To a large degree the identified success factors can be said to focus on three elements:

- the characteristics of relationships among stakeholders;
- the quality of resource users' participation; and
- the centrality of process.

Based on these points, one of the intriguing concepts that came from the conference and workshop concerns construction of a grid or check list of factors whose presence (or absence) might provide an across-the-board test of the likelihood of success. If such a grid existed, it could prove invaluable for people involved in the process at various levels: project designers, funders evaluating proposals, project managers attempting to improve performance of on-going projects, evaluation teams, and even local resource user groups searching for appropriate forms of cooperations.

A relatively quick and inexpensive way to pursue this possibility is to take the core notions of what might make for success and apply them to a group of real life interventions, i.e., projects. It should be underscored that the idea was not to evaluate these projects in any way, but to use them as a data base to test out the possibility of establishing a 'success factors check list' of common or recurring elements that seem to contribute to attaining NRM goals.

Building on this enthusiastic embrace of the search for better understanding of success factors, it was decided to attempt applying the newly formulated suggestions to actual projects. In tandem with this project-focused research, it seems germane in this paper on stalking success to pull together the common recommendations

from participants in the conference and workshop, as well as findings of other forums, on the general question of what makes for success in USAID/NGO efforts in natural resource management.

This paper looks first at the selected projects in terms of the application of possible success criteria. Once this has been explored, attention turns to some of the recurrent concerns and suggestions revealed by a review of recent deliberations.

Projects Selected For Examination

Working from another study underway concurrently with this paper, entitled *Non-Governmental Organizations and Natural Resource Management: A Compendium of Interventions*, (Ramanathan, In press) a half dozen projects were selected on these simple criteria:

- projects in Africa funded by USAID that involve NGOs in NRM interventions -- central and mission funded;
- projects with relatively complete documentation available through USAID in Washington -- five of the six have had a midterm evaluation, though none have had a final evaluation.

Before looking at the projects themselves, one noteworthy observation on the selection process concerns the very small pool of projects. Only twenty USAID-supported NRM projects with NGO involvement in Africa were identified during the compendium process (Annex A). Perhaps one reason for this is the devolution of

decision-making to USAID country missions, which has reduced to necessity of extensive reporting to USAID Washington, and hence reduced the quantity and quality of project files available in Washington.

Undoubtedly, a lot of unsolicited proposals funded by missions in the field, especially those receiving local currency, are not tracked in USAID Washington. For example, none of the projects on the list are implemented by African NGOs, even though USAID missions have been stepping up their relations with such national agencies. This leads to the unavoidable albeit disquieting conclusion that to carry out even a cursory cataloguing of USAID's NRM portfolio would require a country-by-country effort.

Presentation Of Selected Projects

The six projects are briefly noted below with comments on what the documents reviewed reveal about evaluation findings. After each thumbnail sketch are a few comments on apparent success factors highlighted by the individual project experiences.

★ **Pilot Village Level Natural Resources Management Activity, Burkina Faso.** 1989 - 1991, \$2,000,000. The mid-term evaluators were impressed with the use of simple, well tested technologies and the quality of the structures and relationships among PVOs, NGOs and local community groups, but the evaluation scope of work did not call for contacting would-be beneficiary groups. Evaluators faulted the project as administratively cumbersome and distant from the field.

Factors highlighted: complex management; life of project too short; importance of relations with resource users and of appropriate solutions.

★ **PVO Co-Financing Project, Kenya, 1985-1995, \$22,401,000.** Long running umbrella project, redesigned and now managed by USAID directly. Midterm evaluation points out very slow rate of grant-making, excessive time demands on USAID staff, but generally good quality of sub-projects funded. Evaluators did not appear to contact actual beneficiaries besides NGOs' personnel.

Factors highlighted: inherent limitations of USAID direct management of NGO umbrella project; obstacle of USAID registration for national NGOs; inability to generate many NRM proposals under this project's parameters.

★ **Planning and Assessment of Wildlife Management Project, Tanzania, 1990-1992, \$2,500,000.** Two US PVOs provide services to government Wildlife Division. Midterm evaluation found progress in developing policies and planning, but overly narrow definition of institution strengthening; also, design flaws in project's multi-tier management. Evaluators did not meet resource users, as project focus is governmental.

Factors highlighted: overlapping authorities in complex project structure; diverse requirements in capacity building; need for realistic and shared expectations; and for involvement of local level.

★ **Natural Resource Management Support Project - the PVO/NGO portion, Africa Regional, 1987-93, \$20,360,000.** As part of overall project, in 1989 a \$1,802,000 cooperative agreement signed with lead US PVO in a consortium to work with NGOs on NRM in four target countries. Midterm evaluators who talked to many NGOs, but no local resource

users, found participatory methods work well to strengthen NGOs' capacities, influencing national NRM planning and furthering collaboration; the project sponsored quality inter-country events.

Factors highlighted: process is essential; NGOs can work and learn well together with right incentives; regional approach is powerful; personnel and other investments are considerable.

One of the workshop concepts was the construction of a grid or check list of factors whose presence (or absence) might provide an across-the-board test of the likelihood of success.

★ **PVO/NGO Support Project, Senegal, 1990-1998, \$15,000,000.** Umbrella project managed by US non-profit, with diversity of sectors, but high concentration of proposals in agriculture and NRM. Considerable start-up phase work in institutional diagnosis and financial certification of NGOs. No evaluations as yet.

Factors highlighted: complex sub-grant review and approval process; institutional strengthening is crucial but takes time.

★ **Natural Resources Management, Zambia, 1989-1995, \$10,091,000.** Part of regional project, combines grant to GOZ and cooperative agreement with US PVO for support to improve local population participation and benefit in game hunting. Despite considerable progress in generating and returning revenue to communities, self-sustaining wildlife management programs and envisioned project influence on policies have not yet occurred,

according to midterm evaluators who contacted at least a few resource users.

Factors highlighted: NGOs most effective at grassroots; limitations of NGO impact on national policies; time span required for NRM sustainable impact.

Conclusions From The Project Document Review

An initial finding is that USAID-supported NRM activities with NGOs are not always located where one might think to look. The Senegal Co-Fi Project, for example has generated over 100 proposals for sub-grants, 80% of which are in agriculture and NRM, even though NRM is not emphasized in the design. **Another generalization is that NGOs' NRM projects defy easy categorization.** Some work entirely within government, others only at grassroots; some aim at resource users while others target needs of NGOs themselves as service providers to user groups.

As to determining whether desk study level of analysis can contribute to developing a 'success factor check list' the results are decidedly mixed. On the positive side, the number of times that success factors identified by the conference and workshop proved to be crucial to goal achievement was revealing. For example, the call to simplify systems and structures in USAID projects is reflected in the repeated observation that complexity or lack of flexibility constrains progress. Another well confirmed indicator of success is the substantial time required to carry out participatory NRM interventions, and the time commitment necessary to reach a level of sustainability.

No single major success factor considered by workshop and conference to be of prime importance is contradicted in these projects; however, some are not as clearly validated as others.

This points to one of the limitations of document-based study: so much is not reported or not even investigated. One can only hope to find overall patterns at this distance. A personal example illustrates this point. Because the author has previously studied USAID umbrella projects, including on-site visits to Senegal and Kenya, he is privy to much more nuanced critique of some projects than is presented in the formalized setting of evaluations. Out of concern for careers, to avoid conflicts, or maybe as a matter of style, many evaluations 'pull punches' on candid critique of projects.

Perhaps the most troubling observation pertaining to success factors that comes out of the desk study is that evaluations are not looking deeply, and sometimes are not even looking in the right places, in order to understand the success ingredients from the standpoint of one major stakeholder group -- the resource users themselves. Only one evaluation appears to have made any effort to gather and analyze data from actual users. This is not primarily the fault of the evaluators, whose hands are full sifting through overly complex institutional relationships on very tight time frames. The weakness is in the scopes of work which focus attention on project management and mechanics rather than demanding that substantial weight be allotted to resource users' perspectives as part of the evaluative process.

In other ways as well, evaluators are not asked to analyze areas where potential success factors could be examined. This mirrors the likelihood that such factors were either under-appreciated or ignored in the project design itself, factors like: quality of participatory methods, locus of project authority, multi-faceted requirements for effective local institution strengthening, and transparent processes among all partners.

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Before leaving the project document review, an opinion might be offered on the success factors based on desk study analysis. Desk studies, if backed by substantial numbers of interviews, would undoubtedly produce a much richer understanding of project realities than documents alone. A more complete desk study might indeed produce a more definitive statement of common project 'failure' factors, i.e., dysfunctional approaches and attitudes may be more readily distinguished than elements which make for success. Still, some field-level 'ground-truthing' appears indispensable for authentic analysis and refinement of hypotheses developed elsewhere.

How Can USAID And NGOs Improve Chances For Success?

Answers to this pertinent query need to be offered on several levels. One level concerns the main subject of this paper, namely how to develop a better understanding of the factors that contribute to success.

Potential for field work as an approach

One way to develop a better understanding of the factors is to pursue the course begun with the conference, workshop and series of studies in the year-long appraisal of USAID/NGO effectiveness in NRM:

- select one or two actual projects and explore them in the field to comprehend their success factors;
- based on these findings, develop practicable advice for fostering these factors in other projects from the design stage onward.

This could be done at several different levels of effort, from a simple three to four week field study to a longer term effort analogous to the PVO Initiatives Project study of umbrella projects in Africa (Drabek and Otto, 1992). If undertaken, this field research should dovetail with the analytical tasks of a somewhat similar nature that are proposed for the next phase of the PVO/NGO NRMS Project (World Learning *et. al.*, 1993).

Ground level examination of one or two NRM projects might provide interesting data on what seems to make for success. The questions would have to be carefully formulated to explore how the supposed success factors measure against reality. For example, one would

probably have to use participatory research methods in order to help determine if participatory approaches actually correlate with NRM successes at individual and community levels.

If such were attempted among the projects selected above, the Senegal and Burkina Faso ones appear to offer the greatest diversity of learning opportunities. The Senegal Co-Fi Project in particular covers a range of sub-projects and sub-grantees. It explicitly lists support to NGOs as part of its methodology. What is more, USAID Dakar has funded other NRM activities with NGOs that might provide opportunities for contrast and comparison.

Improvements based on findings and lessons from this, and other, studies

The response to how USAID/NGO success at NRM might be improved can also be answered with reference to specific findings gleaned from the year-long appraisal and from other studies. Some of these are universal lessons. They may have lost their novelty but not their importance.

- Involve the resources users, NGOs and other project partners in the design of the project and its management as it is implemented. NRM progress requires continual, genuine participation among stakeholders.
- Get the communications right at all costs. Clarity and consensus are fundamental.
- Be realistic about objectives, outputs, timeframes and other expectations, and be ready to adjust them rather than force shortcuts that undermine attainment of greater goals.

- Use vocabulary and conceptual frameworks that value the development of competent autonomous resource user groups which are the base of natural resource management.

- Allocate adequate resources for capacity building, possibly at several levels from community to national institutions, for this is an inescapable condition for sustainability.

- Projects may of necessity involve several players, but overly complex structures hamper implementation in many projects. Unambiguous roles and relationships are key.

- Respect the legitimate function of accountability while striving to reduce regulatory rigidities that waste resources and stifle creativity.

- Conduct thorough, objective, learning-oriented evaluations, that report fully and candidly; make sure the resource users are an integral part of the process.

Factors specific to the USAID/NGO relationship

A final tier of responses to the quest for improving success factors treats the unique USAID/NGO relationship. This is a love/hate association marked by more dependency than participants on either side may wish were true. The realities are that, A) NGOs are arguably the single most effective vehicle for improvement of grassroots NRM using USAID's resources, and B) few sources of funding for NGOs working on NRM in Africa match the resources available through USAID, particularly for US NGOs (PVOs). All concerned seem to sense the opportunity for changing the status quo that is offered by the current processes of rethinking

development aid and restructuring USAID. Here is some of what has been learned about how USAID and NGOs might work together better:

★ USAID and NGOs, both of which are heterogeneous groupings of headquarters and field offices, agencies and projects, need to understand better each other's needs, constraints and capacities. More NGO involvement in USAID program strategies and NGO orientation for USAID staff could overcome mutual unfamiliarity.

★ Negative impacts of USG regulations and accountability standards, imposed in settings where they inhibit USAID's ability to cooperate with local and national African agencies, can be mitigated by the employment of intermediaries. Mechanisms like umbrella projects and endowments serve as a conduit and filter, allowing flexibility and risk-taking while maintaining necessary fiduciary stewardship.

★ Strengthening NGOs should be viewed by USAID as a program imperative for attainment of USAID's objectives, from improving technical and managerial capacities to supporting NGO networks and other learning/exchange forums, on both national and regional levels.

★ Assuring authentic participation of natural resource users in the planning, implementation and evaluations of NRM projects is a responsibility donors and NGOs share. Rather than assume NGOs use adequate participatory methods, USAID should investigate, champion and even mandate this essential aspect of NRM interventions.

★ An appreciation of NGOs' peculiar intermediary position, balanced between donors

as clients and grassroots groups as constituents, will help USAID deal with the competing demands of greater quantified, time-bound results versus sustainable progress based on empowered communities of resource users. Measuring and valuing local institutional growth and development is one step in redefining success.

Some of the changes proposed in this paper and throughout the year-long appraisal of USAID/NGO effectiveness in NRM will not be easy; others are already on the way to being implemented; all are possible.

★ The modalities and mentality of contracting that pertain to USAID-designed projects competitively bid among for-profit firms cannot be carried over to NGO-implemented programs. Not only is the funding mechanism different, but the attitude must be that of partnership in which NGOs are acknowledged as independent agents with legitimate self-defined mandates and activities. Too much control on USAID's part may compromise the flexibility, risk-taking and other innovative qualities that make NGOs attractive and partners in NRM.

What comes next?

There is an African saying one hears after exciting ideas have been expounded and the challenge of execution sets in:

**"Loud noises scare away birds,
but don't make the millet grow"**

The 'millet' to be nourished by the knowledgeable thinkers whose ideas are represented here is indeed the staple of natural resource management itself: changes in attitudes and practices in relationships. A tall order by anyone's standards.

There is not much new in all this, but what is new is the growing body of people who are saying it openly and finding more common ground among colleagues in both USAID and NGO communities. Now is the right time to invest more time and energy in pushing this reform agenda at various levels. Every new project design or proposal review, every midterm or final evaluation, every conference or task force is an occasion to insert, clarify and reinforce the values and process of local user participation, inter-agency collaboration, and stakeholder partnership.

Another old adage facetiously explains why important but difficult improvements do not get done: "If it was so easy, we would have done it a long time ago." Some of the changes proposed in this paper and throughout the year-long appraisal of USAID/NGO effectiveness in NRM will not be easy; others are already on the way to being implemented; all are possible. **Many of these changes are easier now in this time of major rethinking and restructuring than they have been, and easier now than they may be in the future.**

The August workshop participants undertook a half-day visioning exercise, imagining the changes that implementation of proposed improvements might bring to NRM in Africa five or six years hence (Annex 2). It is up to those who share the vision of reformed USAID/NGO relations to 'make the millet grow' for the benefit of Africa's resources users. One day, from the vantage point of, say, 1999, we will look back on this current period as one of

great opportunity, and judge whether we collectively made the effort to accomplish difficult tasks, or just settled for 'loud noises.'

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Annex A

Identified USAID-supported natural resource management projects in Africa involving NGOs 1/

Country	Name of Project	Project Number
Africa regional	Natural Resources Management Support*	698-0467
Burkina Faso	Pilot Village Natural Resources Management	686-0276
Comoros	Anjouan Sustainable Agriculture	602-0002
Kenya	PVO Co-Financing*	615-0236
Kenya	Conservation of Biodiverse Resource Areas	615-0247
Madagascar	Amber Mountain Conservation and Development	687-0103
Madagascar	Debt-for-Nature Swap	687-0112
Madagascar	Sustainable Approaches to Viable Environmental Management	687-0110
Mali	PVO Co-Financing*	688-0247
Namibia	Reaching Out with Education to Adults in Development*	673-0004
Niger	Agriculture Sector Development Grant	683-0246
Niger	Agriculture Sector Development Grant II	683-0265
Rwanda	Natural Resources Management	696-0129
Senegal	PVO/NGO Support	685-0284
South Africa regional:		
1) Botswana	Natural Resources Management	690-0251-33
2) Namibia	Living in a Finite Environment	690-0251-73
3) Zambia	Natural Resources Management	690-0251-11
4) Zimbabwe	Natural Resources Management	690-0251-13
Tanzania	Planning and Assessment for Wildlife Management	621-0171
Zaire	Small Project Support	660-0125

* Indicates umbrella type projects.

1/ From Ramanathan (In press).

Annex B

1999: A Vision for NGOs and USAID in Africa

In the best of all possible worlds, what would the institutional relationship between the PVO/NGO communities and USAID look like? More specifically, what would it look like in natural resource management (NRM) interventions in Africa on the brink of millennium? About 20 representatives from USAID Africa Bureau and US PVOs (including several InterAction members) recently took up this challenge question at a Washington, DC workshop that is part of a year-long assessment of USAID/NGO effectiveness in NRM in Africa.

While the morning workshop sessions produced a series of practical steps for improving USAID/NGO performance in NRM activities in the near future, the participants spent the afternoon developing a vision of more sweeping change - a paradigmatic shift in stakeholder relationships. Here is what they imagined:

By 1991 all major players, including African NGOs and US PVOs among others, have the necessary technical and organizational skills for effective NRM activities in Africa. For example, overseas NGOs will help provide national NGOs with skills for the latter to act as advocates in national policy, while US PVOs will themselves be more effective advocates in the US.

In this ideal future, African NGOs have built up national and regional capacities to manage and coordinate NRM interventions that are complex and long-term. At least four regional NGO centers in Africa are promoting improved performance in NRM through technical assistance, rosters of regional consultant expertise, and information clearinghouse services. Workshop visionaries picture South-South exchanges as a central focus, with increased capacities and opportunities for African universities and researchers to work with NGOs and rural resource users. The NGO regional resource units have endowed core funding to ensure their survival and allow them to concentrate on their outreach mandate.

At the NRM workshop, one working group could foresee new USAID by the turn of the century that has eliminated excess "paper-pushing" requirements and has escaped the confines of year-year fiscal cycles into longer-term planning modalities that are directly coordinated with other donors' programs. By then national NGOs, as well as US PVOs, are integrally involved in USAID's planning process, and USAID regulations are more tailored to NGO realities. Also, USAID is undertaking a series of regional and country initiatives for testing hypotheses to determine effective approaches to NRM, institutional roles and responsibilities.

Another discussion group at the workshop posited that by 1999, programs (rather than projects) are financed through umbrella projects, endowments and other flexible location-specific arrangements, often with PVO/NGOs serving as intermediaries. The program approach, which groups a series of interrelated activities or projects, reduces unproductive and wasteful burdens of frequent funding negotiations. It shifts energies and resources from prevailing models of getting and spending, to the essential process of genuine participation and communication among partners.

Looking ahead a half-dozen years, African resource user groups are assertive participants with NGOs and donors in design and implementation of NRM efforts, according to workshop divination. These user groups propose interventions, carry out their own needs assessments, and approach outside agencies to negotiate the terms of cooperation. With user groups gaining access to technical assistance, their relationships with NGOs have evolved to where NGOs just fill in the technical gaps, and serve as user groups' advocates with governments and donors, protecting and promoting user's sustainable resource management plans.

For this local autonomy to take place, the workshop participants optimistically project that by 1999 national governments in Africa have come to understand the effectiveness of user-based governance of natural resources. As a result, they have put in place in the necessary legal and administrative arrangements to support this devolution of responsibility and authority. Decentralization of governments' own structures has occurred apace, with an emphasis on playing supportive roles to citizen initiatives.

Is this a desirable future? Certainly refinements could be made and other elements added, but it does appear to ease some current constraints. Could it be realized in less than a decade? Some pieces have already happened, in small ways and test cases, and the vision's overall probability may depend on who shares it and who is willing to work toward it. It was observed that, only a dozen years ago, few NGOs would have identified NRM or the environment as one of their core concerns, so we know change is possible. Indeed it is inevitable.

USAID/NGO-NRM Projects in Africa: When

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